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Back-Trailing on the Old Frontiers

Drawing by CHARLES M. RUSSELL

Strange Fate of John Jacob Astor's Ship, the Tonquin, Sole Survivor of Whose Murdered Crew Visited Terrible Revenge on Indian Enemies

BY H. P. RABAN

NO DISASTER of the sea has brought to a ship a more dramatic or tragic fate than that which in 1811, off the wild and rocky coast of Vancouver Island, befell the brig Tonquin, pride and hope of John Jacob Astor, in his great Pacific coast trading venture. No flight of imagination in fiction of the seven seas outdoes in climax this historical incident of Indian treachery and revenge by a desperate white man.

In June, 1810, Astor had well in hand his ambitious plan for control of the great Northwestern fur trade by the establishment of a line of communication and trading posts from St. Louis up the Missouri to the Rockies and down the Columbia to the Pacific. The whole project centered about the establishment at the mouth of the Columbia of a great trading post, which might be constantly supplied from Atlantic coast markets by merchant vessels and would form a base for the extension of coastwise and inland operations. He bought as his first ship to send round Cape Horn to the Pacific the Tonquin, two hundred and ninety tons, and mounting ten guns. Early in September she put to sea in command of Lieutenant Jonathan Thorn, U. S. N., a resolute and experienced officer. The passengers included four junior partenrs of Astor, besides clerks and artisans. The crew numbered twenty men, of whom thirteen were French-Canadian voyageurs, or river boatmen, selected by Astor because of their knowledge of fur trading.

Down the Hudson to New York in French-Canadian River Batteaux.

These voyageurs provided something of a sensation in New York upon their arrival there to join the ship. When engaged by Astor's agents in the north, they determined to travel to the seaport in their own peculiar style. Fitting up a large, light bark canoe, they transported it by wagon from the St. Lawrence to Lake Champlain, traversed the length of the lake in it, again put it on wheels and finally launched it on the Hudson at Lansingburgh. Down the river they swept with song and flourish, rounding Manhattan under the astonished gaze of burghers who never before had seen such a craft.

The Tonquin, after an uneventful journey, rounded the Horn on Christmas day, and after various adventeres dropped anchor in the mouth of the Columbia river on March 25th, 1811. On June 5th, good progress having been made in building a fortified trading post, the Tonquin set sail to coast northward for trading with twenty-three men aboard. An Indian interpreter was soon picked up, and steering to the north, Captain Thorn in a few days cast anchor off Vancouver's Island, against the advice of the interpreter, who warned him of the treachery of the island natives. The following morning the Indians in their picturesque canoes swarmed about the ship to trade. The sight was one of unusual interest to the men from eastern Canada and the Atlantic seaboard.

Danger from Savages Threatens, But Captain of Tonquin Is Obdurate

The North Pacific coast Indians made their living by fishing and were as expert in handling their canoes as were the plains Indians their horses. Some of their craft were fifty feet long, hewn from a single tree, and carried as many as thirty persons. Bows and sterns were often decorated with grotesque carvings of men and animals. The men wore queer head-dresses sometimes of great size, made from various materials, including wood. Differing from the tall, well-formed, handsome tribesmen of the northwest plains, these coast savages were small, squat in stature, ill formed, with crooked legs, thick ankles and flat feet.

Captain Thorn, a man of short temper and contemptuous of the Indians, found them hard to trade with. After some trouble with an old chief he kicked the latter overboard. The other Indians at once left the ship, and when Alexander McKay, one of Astor's partners, came aboard after a visit to the beach, he begged the captain to weigh anchor. Captain Thorn refused, pointing to the cannon and firearms as sufficient safeguard. The next morning at daybreak a canoe came alongside with twenty unarmed and apparently friendly Indians, who offered otter skins in trade. The officer on watch allowed them to come aboard. Soon another canoe followed, and then others, until the ship's deck was well filled. The officer now became alarmed and called Captain Thorn and McKay, the latter noting that many of the Indians wore short skin mantles beneath which arms might be concealed.

Captain Thorn at first declined to clear the decks and get under way, but soon he shared the alarm growing among the crew and gave orders to weigh anchor and make sail. The Indians now offered to trade with the captain on his own terms. He accepted, and a hurried trade of ottor skins, mostly for knives, began. Suddenly, while the sails were being shaken out and the anchor was nearly up, a wild yell burst forth from the red men, knives and war clubs were brandished and every white man on deck was attacked by several savages. The first to fall was one Lewis, ship's clerk, who was knocked down the companion-way with a mortal knife wound in his back. McKay was hurled overboard and killed by women in canoes. The leader of the Indians attacked Captain Thorn, but was killed with the officer's claspknife. The captain, however, was at once overwhelmed and his lifeless body thrown into the sea. The members of the crew defended themselves desperately, but in a few minutes, all were killed excepting seven men aloft making sail. Three of these were caught and stabbed to death, the remaining four escaping to the cabin where they found Lewis alive, but helpless from his wound. The four sailors barred the door and broke holes through the companion-way, soon clearing the decks with muskets found in the cabin. They then trained deck guns on the departing canoes, killing a number of their occupants. The interpreter had gone ashore with the other Indians.

Four Sailors Captured and Put to Death With Revolting Tortures.

That night the four sailors put to sea in a boat for Astoria, but being unable to weather a point of land, took refuge in a cove. There they were captured while sleeping by Indians, and after being held a day were put to death with revolting tortures, which the interpreter witnessed.

The morning after the attack on the ship the Indians, believing the vessel to be deserted, again flocked around it in their canoes. As they drew near a solitary figure appeared on deck. It was recognized by the interpreter as Lewis, and as he made friendly signs, a few savages ventured aboard. When they reached the deck, Lewis had disappeared, so others followed until the deck was crowded and the sides covered with clambering Indians lustful for plunder. Below decks, Lewis, dying from loss of blood and pain, was laboriously making his way to the powder magazine with flint and steel. He struck a spark into one of the kegs of powder and an explosion followed that split the ship asunder. Lewis had made good his vow to the four sailors, who had left him at his own urging, to end his own life in visiting a terrible revenge upon the Indians.

Interpreter, Only Survivor, Sees Ship Blown up With Its Toll of Death.

The interpreter was in the main chains when the explosion came, and he was hurled into the sea unhurt. According to his statement on his return to Astoria with news of the disaster to the Tonquin, the bay presented an awful spectacle as he pulled himself into a drifting canoe. The ship had disappeared, but the water was covered with fragments of wreckage, shattered canoes and scores of Indians struggling in death agonies. More than a hundred were killed. Many were crippled and mutilated.

The tragedy of the Tonquin was only the first of the disasters that destined Astor's enterprise to failure. Succeeding misfortunes were capped by the coming of the war of 1812 with Britain and the failure of the United States government to afford the settlement at the mouth of the Columbia any protection. Soon Astoria was taken over by the British and was for a time a colony of the king. This led eventually to British ownership of the Pacific coast now included in British Columbia.